Containing the Class Struggle: Skocpol on Revolution

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Theda Skocpol is surely one of the most influential figures in American sociology today. She is the author of an award-winning study of revolution — States and Social Revolutions — a learned, methodologically sophisticated work of comparative history which has won extraordinary praise from sociologists in the English-speaking world.¹ She has contributed to and edited, or coedited, Bringing the State Back In and Vision and Method in Historical Sociology, essay collections devoted to vindicating the role of the state in historical study and to comparative method, respectively — both much discussed and in wide use as college texts.² Skocpol has enjoyed a high professional profile over the years, having
housed a number of teaching and research posts at Princeton, the University of Chicago and Harvard, as well as positions of responsibility within the American Sociological Association, including chair of the Political Sociology Section.

Skocpol defends, together with a growing number of co-thinkers, a distinct variety of post-Marxism. This current openly and unabashedly defends the utility of various Marxist categories when it comes to the analysis of social matters, particularly class arrangements. Skocpol herself goes so far as to affirm the relevance of "Marx's call for a working-class-based socialism" in the West today. All receptivity to Marxism, however, stops at the threshold of Marxist political theory. Skocpol sums up its inherent debility with the following words: "...classical Marxism failed to foresee or adequately explain the autonomous power, for good or ill, of states as administrative machineries embedded in a militarized international states system." This failure to grasp the peculiar sources, effects and weight of political domination means that social categories borrowed from Marxism must be supplemented by a "realist" or "organizational" view of the political, to be drawn especially from the works of Otto Hintze and Max Weber. Such a view will stress the administrative apparatus of the state as a distinct and autonomous source of power.

The passage quoted above, on the limitations of "classical" Marxism, conveys a too-restricted sense of the scope of Skocpol's critique. For it is not simply classical Marxism, however conceived, which she takes to task, but Marxist political theory tout court, ranging from Marx and Engels through Lenin and Gramsci to the post-war revival, in all its complexity and variety, including such figures as Nicos Poulantzas, Perry Anderson and Goran Therborn. At stake here is not simply the viability of an intellectual tradition (rather, traditions), but a question of great practical import. The state has been central to the strategic thinking of socialists, from social democrats to Leninists. Just how one understands the capitalist state — the nature and sources of state power, the mechanisms insuring that it really does defend capitalist order, the limits to state intervention in the economy, and so on — will go along way toward determining the sort of socialist one is. These considerations make it all the more curious that States and Social Revolutions has received so little in the way of sustained critique by Marxists.
It will be argued here that Skocpol's critique of Marxism is highly misleading. The Marxism of Marx/Engels and Lenin is not voluntarist, intra-national and neglectful of the role of the state. Further, the limits of Skocpol's notion of "potential autonomy" will be explored. Finally, the consequences of Skocpol's reduction of the salience of class in revolution will be indicated. For this purpose, arguments from each of the three phases into which Skocpol divides the course of revolution will be examined.

According to Skocpol the prevailing theories of revolution are voluntarist, intra-nationalist and society-centered rather than structural, internationalist and state-centered, as is her own. Marxism shares with other theories of revolution the image of revolution as "made by purposive movements." This purposive image is highly misleading when it urges that revolutionary vanguards can by themselves generate the conditions of revolutionary crisis and triumph. As she says: "In fact, in historical revolutions, differently situated and motivated groups have become participants in complex unfoldings of multiple conflicts. These conflicts have been powerfully shaped and limited by existing socio-economic and international conditions." An "impersonal and nonsubjective viewpoint," a structural perspective in short, ought to be substituted for the naive voluntarism of Marxist authors.

The intra-national bias of Marxism ought to be shunned as well. Instead of an "almost exclusive focus on socioeconomic tendencies within national societies," a proper treatment of revolution requires a focus on transnational realities, especially the world capitalist economy and the international states system. The world economy may exert a powerful shaping force on the domestic class and political structure of a given country where a revolution is likely to develop. Military competition within the inter-state system, "especially defeats in wars or threats of invasion and struggles over colonial controls," tends to act far more directly upon potentially revolutionary situations. Analysts of revolution ignore such matters at their peril.

Finally, Skocpol criticizes hitherto existing theories of revolution for excessive attention to the social — a focus that has tended to marginalize study of the role of the state in revolutions and, in the Marxist case, to reduce the state to an epiphenomenon of the class struggle. While the class struggle
merits analysis, "the historical realities of social revolutions insistantly suggest the need for a more state-centered approach." Such an approach will stress the importance of the state in revolutionary crises, as a stake of revolutionary struggle and as a target of revolutionary transformation.

Theorists have been seriously constrained in their efforts to grasp the importance of the state in revolutions by their failure to understand the nature of "state power as such." Yes, states will adjust to the international and domestic contexts in which they function. States may be so equipped as to allow "non-state actors" some say in state policy making. Still, "administrative and coercive organizations are the basis of state power as such."

Such a conception of state power enables one to probe those situations in which the state wins independence, or autonomy, from the social groups of a given society. While the state usually defends the interests of the dominant class, as the Marxists argue, it need not always do so. The state, after all, has a distinct interest in the maintenance of "state power as such." The possibilities of "potential autonomy" ought not to be ruled out in advance, as Marxists do with their emphasis on the inevitable supremacy of dominant class interest in the determination of state action.

Such are the main lines of the critique of Marxism which Skocpol expounds in the introduction to States and Social Revolutions. The bulk of the work presents a stage theory of the French, Russian and Chinese revolutions, in the sense that each revolution is divided into distinct segments, each with broadly similar tasks and outcomes. The first stage is that of the "revolutionary political crisis." In each case the crisis is set off by foreign entanglements: the debt resulting from French aid to the American revolution; foreign invasion of China; and Russian involvement in World War I. In France and China these entanglements spur intra-state conflicts as forces on state terrain seek to avoid various burdens arising from attempts to solve the crisis. In these countries the result of the conflict is the breakdown of the "administrative and military integrity of the state." In Russia, the breakdown proceeds directly from inter-state conflict. In all three cases the removal of "coercive controls" paves the way for social revolution proper.
Skocpol applies the phrase "social revolutionary crisis" to a discrete moment of the revolutionary process — that moment when the masses in the countryside intervene to rearrange class relations. As noted, this phase follows the removal of coercive controls. This sequence is only reasonable since, as Skocpol remarks: "...states can repress popular forces and revolutionary movements." Skocpol’s analysis here mostly concerns the structural conditions in the countryside which determine the tempo and final content of the social revolutions.

The moment of peasant upheaval is followed by a phase of state-building by "state-oriented" élites. Much of the discussion focuses on why one particular organization prevails over its revolutionary rivals. In line with her view that legitimacy is not an "important explanatory concept," she downplays the force of ideological and programmatic contributions to the ultimate supremacy of one or another party. In her view ideology may be an effective organizational cement for élites, but pride of place must be given to examining what the élites are “actually doing.” And, generally speaking, what are such élites actually doing? They are “struggling to assert and make good their claims to state sovereignty.” They do so in order to "enhance national standing in the international context." The road to enhanced national standing leads through tightened centralization and deepened bureaucratization of the states in question. The result is that these states are both more powerful within their own societies and better able to participate in interstate rivalry.

The behavior of contending revolutionary élites is easier to comprehend when their social origins and training are taken into account. These élites came from families economically "oriented" to state activity in one way or another (e.g., as lawyers or state employees). And the élite members themselves were highly educated — a traditional track to state employment in these societies. In short, if we find revolutionary élites busily nurturing state organizations, this should come as no surprise; they were born and bred to it.

Finally, a fact of great importance about the contending élites is held to be their regional and ethnic origins. The victorious élite contenders tend to be in the right place at the right time. That is, their geographical and social roots are
sunk in soil rich in the resources (human, economic, technological) most needed for revolutionary victory and state-building. For example, the Bolsheviks were Great Russians. They found at hand a working class, a rail network, etc. The Mensheviks were "more likely to come from minority regions and nationalities" poor in the relevant resources.28

**Skocpol's Critique of Marxism** Skocpol's critique of Marxism is highly impressionistic and misleading. While readers are apt to be tolerant of the broad brush stroke in a summary account of several bodies of theory, Skocpol repeatedly puts even this tolerance severely to the test. The following passage on the voluntarist bent of Marxism exemplifies a recurring problem:

> This image suggests that the ultimate and sufficient condition for revolution is the withdrawal of this consensual support and, conversely, that no regime could survive if the masses were consciously disgruntled. Though of course such ideas could never be completely accepted by Marxists, they can creep in by implication along with emphases on class consciousness or hegemony.29

Here Skocpol discerns an extremely implausible position — revolution by disgruntlement — in the work of an extremely large number of thinkers — those given to "emphases on class consciousness or hegemony" — without naming a name or quoting a text. Further, conceptual description and critique is replaced by the extraction of an image or metaphorical figure said to underly a welter of texts. This deepens the vagueness of the passage, rendering it less accessible to verification and discussion. How are such images arrived at? How is their adequacy assessed?

The charge of voluntarism is aimed not so much at the disgruntlement thesis as at the view that consciously revolutionary vanguards can by themselves generate the conditions of revolutionary crisis and triumph. How far is this "purposive image" useful for understanding classical Marxism — Marx/Engels and Lenin in particular? The writings of Marx and Engels on the revolutions of 1848 comprise their lengthiest consideration of a revolutionary process. But this discussion is by no means a simple record of the assemblage of the masses into a revolutionary subject and its collision with the class adversary.
The complexity of their account is striking. This complexity derives from the variety of units of analysis employed: national conjunctures, the international sway of the market, the continental scope of military action. These terms suggest the diversity in orders of causal force at work: political, economic and military. Finally, the social struggles analyzed include struggles for national liberation as well as diverse forms of class conflict. Moreover, Marx's opposition to voluntarism was not a purely platonic affair. It was one of the principal points at issue in the 1850 split in the Communist League. Said Marx of his adversaries: "Will is put forward as the chief factor in revolution, instead of real relationships."

Nor can Lenin's thought be forced into the voluntarist mould. Lenin's reflections on the revolutions of 1917 make it clear enough that he did not "try to decipher the logic of the process or outcomes of a social revolution by adopting the perspective or following the actions of any one class or elite or organization," as, according to Skocpol, voluntarists tend to do. Consider this passage from "Letters From Afar": "That the revolution succeeded so quickly and — seemingly, at the first superficial glance — so radically, is only due to the fact that, as a result of an extremely unique historical situation, absolutely dissimilar currents, absolutely heterogeneous class interests, absolutely contrary political and social strivings have merged, and in a strikingly 'harmonious' manner." It was the complexity of Lenin's concept of contradiction, the heterogeneous sources of a revolutionary break, which Louis Althusser tried to catch in a famous essay. It has in fact been argued that the defect in Lenin's discussions of the revolutionary crisis, as with Althusser's attempt to theorize them, is not reductionism, voluntarist or otherwise, but pluralism. As Perry Anderson says of Althusser: "We are left with an indiscriminate list rather than a genuine explanatory structures." In any case Lenin's distance from a single-minded focus on the "actions of any one class" should be plain. As he put it, the "objective changes" amounting to a revolutionary situation are "independent of the will, not only of individual groups and parties, but even of individual classes."

As with Marx and Engels, Lenin's rejection of voluntarism was a practical matter. Lenin and other leaders of the Russian party led a bitter fight at the Third Congress of the Com-
munist International against the "theory of the offensive," much favored by the left wing of the German party. The point of this line of thought was that a revolutionary minority could, by frantically offensive tactics, generate the most favorable conditions for a final clash with the enemy. In sum, where Skocpol quotes Wendell Phillips ("Revolutions are not made; they come"), she might just as well have quoted Lenin: "A revolution cannot be made to order — it develops."

The complaint that Marxism holds an intra-national conception of revolution, ignoring the international system of states generally and "military competition" in particular, is no more well founded than the voluntarist claim. There is no point repeating what was said above of Marx and Engels' treatment of 1848. Readers will search these texts in vain for an intra-national account of revolution. As Claudin puts it: "For the rest it is clear from the whole content of the Manifesto — although implicitly — and from other texts of this period that the character of this struggle is international, global, universal...and that this character arises precisely from the world created by the bourgeoisie, unified both by the market and by the nature of the new productive forces." Marx and Engels were also very much aware of the effects of "military competition," especially those arising from the great counter-revolutionary powers — Russia, Prussia and Austria — within this new world.

Nor is there any possibility of arguing that Lenin held an intra-national conception of either the causes or outcome of 1917. It is no secret that Lenin's analysis of imperialism and imperialist war bore directly upon his estimate of the possibilities for the seizure of power by the proletariat after the outbreak of World War I. Of course he thought it greatly accelerated such possibilities. As for the effect of international developments on the Russian revolutions, he referred to the war as "a great, mighty and all-powerful 'stage-manager'..." Nor did Lenin only take an international view of the causes of the coming revolutions. He also thought that the completion of the socialist project in Russia depended upon the fate of the revolutionary movement in the advanced countries of Europe. At least, as Lowy says, this is the burden of the "overwhelming bulk of Lenin's texts which at all touch on this point."
No doubt an intra-national, as well as stagist and evolutionary, conception of social development has had a powerfully deforming effect at times within the Marxist tradition. But to present this as the tradition without any reference to the classic writings on the decisive conjunctures of 1848 and 1917 is highly misleading.

Finally we come to Skocpol's discussion of Marxist views on the state. These latter, society-centered as they are, fail to emphasize the importance of the state in the revolutionary process — as an important site of revolutionary crisis, a stake of revolutionary struggle and a target of revolutionary transformation. Lastly, Skocpol discusses Marxism's failure to grasp the potential autonomy of the state.

None of the particular claims stemming from the charge that Marxism has failed to recognize the importance of the state in the revolutionary process will stand scrutiny. The importance of the state as a site of revolutionary crisis was recognized by Marx and Engels in their work on 1848. They considered it important to revolutionary policy in Germany, for example, that the democratic camp should attempt to aggravate contradictions between the liberal bourgeoisie and the state, notably the army and the bureaucracy. The moment of state crisis and disorganization is of course a recurrent component of Lenin's discussions of the revolutionary situation generally. Both Lenin and Trotsky note the role of the crisis at the summits of the Czarist state in the run-up to February. As Trotsky has it, for example, the nobles performed a "mighty service for its mortal enemy" by disordering relations between the state and the Czar. Oddly enough, in spite of her state-centered approach, Skocpol is unable to locate such a moment in the pre-revolutionary period.

It is especially difficult to accept Skocpol's claim that Marxism, in its emphasis on class struggle and social structure, has neglected the state as a stake in revolutionary struggle. It is a strategic focus on state power rather than the culture, the economy generally, the factory, etc. which distinguishes Marxism from other varieties of socialist thought: utopian socialisms, syndicalism and so on. As Marx said in the famous letter to Bolte: "The political movement of the working class... has as its ultimate objective the conquest of political power." It is the state that which serves as the ultimate guarantor of the
cohesion of class divided societies, by virtue of its repressive apparatus. Social gains that threaten the fundamentals of capitalist order remain provisional as long as the repressive apparatus is intact. Hence the social predicament of the working class demands a political solution. Because of this strategic orientation, attempts to rescue Marxism from its society-centered proclivities are misconceived.

Moreover in the work of Marx and Lenin it is emphatically stressed that the transformation of state structures, which our author considers a prime feature of revolutions, is a decisive sphere of political practice. Marx claimed that while previous revolutions had perfected the state machinery, the task of the proletarian revolution was to utterly smash this machinery and reorder the state apparatus so as to greatly expand popular participation in political life. Lenin saw in this task nothing less than "the chief and fundamental point in the Marxist theory of the state."

The above points should demonstrate how misleading is Skocpol's claim that Marxism is a simple theory of "social structural change and class conflict." Nor is it a state-centered theory. The stark, abstract state-centered — society-centered dilemma with which Skocpol confronts theories of revolution is itself a dead end. After all, if a "society-centered" sociology reduces the state to the social, how can we expect the "state-centered" alternative to escape a reverse, and equally sterile, reduction of the social to the state?

Potential Autonomy of the State? Skocpol's central criticism of Marxist political theory is that it fails to grasp the "potential autonomy of the state." That is, Marxists have forgotten that the state may be "at variance with" the dominant class, or experience a "contradictory clash of interests" with the dominant class, or "enforce concessions to subordinate class demands," or even achieve autonomy "vis-à-vis entire class structures or modes of production."

The contrast that Skocpol wishes to draw here between her own views and those of the Marxists loses much of its force to her imprecision. The first three formulations may reasonably be subsumed under the rubric of "relative autonomy" — a phrase intended by Marxists to acknowledge that the long-run maintenance of dominant class power may require a
variety of concessions and sacrifices to the dominated classes. Indeed, after Gramsci, sacrifices of an “economic/corporate” nature by the dominant class have been taken as an index of a secure hegemonic strategy. Of course the nature and limits of relative autonomy are subject to dispute, but the considerations to which Skocpol alludes in her first three formulations are routinely acknowledged. The final formulation breaks with any recognizably Marxist position. But Skocpol herself fails to identify any historical episode that can be taken to embody this most extreme formulation.

In the six historical cases that she discusses in any depth, two states were so ordered internally and historically situated as to enjoy maximum autonomy according to her analysis: Prussia and Japan. While Skocpol brings into her analysis the rough weight of external pressure and the degree of agrarian development, the feature that more than any other separates the experience of the two countries from that of France and China is the relationship of the landed nobility to the organization of the state apparatus. That is, in these instances the landed nobility was unable at the decisive moment to distort state policy and precipitate state breakdown because it was either excluded from the upper levels of the state administrative apparatus (as in Tokugawa Japan) or present only in an atomized and highly diluted form (as in Hohenzollern Prussia). Moreover the Napoleonic Wars and Western penetration of Japan exerted the sort of external pressure that Skocpol sees as an important trigger of expanded state autonomy.

Nevertheless, Skocpol does not argue that the reform periods following these favorable conjunctures resulted in state-sponsored alterations in the class structures in place, which of course her most extreme formulation of the potential autonomy thesis holds to be possible. No attempt is made to claim that the reform periods in the two countries led to the expropriation of the landed upper classes, which she identifies as the dominant class in each case. In the Prussian instance, she affirms that such reforms as were enacted were “implemented in ways that reinforced the pre-existing class relations between landlords and peasants.” Of Japan, she merely remarks that Japanese agriculture was “structured very much as it had been in Tokugawa times before the Meiji Restoration.” Hence the theoretical novelty for which States and Social Revolutions is best
known is simply not sustained in the detail of the author's historical analysis.

Given the collapse of the concept of state autonomy, the question arises: How useful is Skocpol's emphasis upon the position of the landed dominant élites within the state apparatus as the key to expanded state autonomy? As we've seen, although Skocpol discusses the effects of external pressure and agrarian conditions, primary stress is put upon the landed élite/state apparatus relation as a condition of state autonomy. State autonomy is thought likely when that relation assumes one of two forms: the exclusion of the dominant class from the state apparatus, or its presence within those apparatuses in a dispersed and atomized condition. The limits of this sort of emphasis can be brought out by a brief look at both her treatment of Russian Absolutism and the case of Austrian Absolutism, which she does not discuss.

According to Skocpol the chain of causation that ends in 1917 begins in the failure of the Czarist state to modernize the countryside. The implementation of the emancipation of the serfs failed to dislodge the nobility. This meant a "low level of real growth in agriculture."\(^57\) This stagnation foiled attempts to stimulate industrial production. The result: defeat in World War I and revolution. Skocpol believes that the landed nobility blocked Imperial modernization of the countryside but that because of their subordinate position in the Czarist state this obstruction can not be seen as a consequence of noble leverage in the state.\(^58\) To explain noble obstruction Skocpol falls back upon a discussion of noble mastery of production. Only the landed nobility had the technical knowledge required to implement the emancipation of the serfs in such a way as, ultimately, to promote industrialization.\(^59\) But they turned their backs on such an emancipation out of regard for their own class interests.

Thus in one of Skocpol's three principal historical cases she is forced to retreat from a "state-centered" explanation of the limits of state autonomy. The Czarist state found its autonomy constrained by the landed nobility, but the source of the constraint — the condition of its possibility — had to be sought in the sphere of production, not on state terrain as one would have expected from her discussion of the preconditions of state autonomy.
A still more damaging point is concealed within her discussion of the Russian case. Skocpol wishes at all costs to avoid a "society-centered" account of the state which will "analytically collapse state and society." To avoid this danger Skocpol takes up an "organizational" and "realist" view of the state, according to which "the administrative and coercive organizations are the basis of state power as such." Yet, as we have seen, the fate of the Czarist "administrative and coercive organizations" is made to depend upon the low level of productive forces with which the Czarist state entered the war and, finally, the class power of the landed nobility — its ability to stymie the modernizing potential of the emancipation. That is, Skocpol is forced to violate her own conception of "state power as such" in order to come to terms with the demise of Czarism.

In the Russian case we saw that one of the alternative conditions for expanded state autonomy — the diluted and atomized insertion of the landed nobility within the state apparatus — shed little light on the course of Czarist state policy. Austrian Absolutism provides a useful terrain for the assessment of Skocpol's second condition of state autonomy — the virtual exclusion of the landed nobility from the state apparatus.

According to Perry Anderson, in the Hapsburg Monarchy under Joseph II the state apparatus was "more distant from the aristocracy than any other in the region: recruited primarily from the German upper middle class of the town, culturally and socially separate from the landowning class." This peculiar bureaucracy allowed the imperial state a "degree of volatile autonomy unknown to its neighbors." Deploying this autonomy, Joseph II abolished serfdom, considerably extended the civic freedoms of the subjects and drastically cut
the rents and tithes to the church and nobility in some parts of the Empire.⁶³

As it happened, Joseph's autonomy was insufficient to sustain these measures: "... relations between monarch and aristocracy reached breaking point. To avert open rebellion in Hungary, centralization had to be jettisoned there. Joseph II's death was the signal for a rapid and general seigneurial reaction. His successor Leopold II was immediately forced to rescind the Land Laws of 1789 and restore the political powers of the Maygar nobility."⁶⁴ Here again Skocpol's discussion of the pre-conditions of state autonomy offers little illumination. Evidently, given the exclusion of the landed nobility from the state apparatus, their ultimate ability to constrain the autonomy of Austrian Absolutism is unavailable to the sort of "organizational" account which Skocpol favors. In Anderson this ability appears rooted in the threat of military action by the Magyar nobility. And the ability to pose this threat leads us in turn, once more, to the relations of production: the historical reliance of the European landed nobility upon extra-economic coercion in the extraction of surplus labor.

It seems clear from both the Russian and Austrian cases that a thorough discussion of the limits of state autonomy must include an account of the class powers of the dominant classes in each case. Disposition over the means of production gave the Russian nobility, as Skocpol sees it, the opportunity to obstruct rural, hence industrial, modernization. Disposition over means of violence gave the Maygar nobility the opportunity to roll back the Josephinian reforms. Both these powers are fundamentally class powers. Can we expect a state-centered sociology to explore this dimension of the limits of state autonomy?

But there seems to be no reason to suppose that the boundaries of state action are merely imposed from the exterior upon any given state. Consider the Czarist state. Anderson points out that the Czarist state was the biggest feudal lord in Russia — with 20,000,000 serfs.⁶⁵ This massive state participation in the rural relations of production raises doubts about the adequacy of Skocpol's analysis of the limits of emancipation. Surely the Czarist state had a wide sphere for the enactment of enlightened policy on its own land; at least Skocpol's analysis would lead one to expect this. However, as Alexander
Gerschenkron concludes, after noting that the state and imperial peasants enjoyed better conditions than did the gentry peasants: "Yet these differences, particularly in the longer run, were not sufficiently large to warrant a different appraisal of the state and imperial peasantry. They too experienced the restrictive effects of the village commune, and the economic development of their farms also was restrained by the action of the government whose deliberate policy it was to bring their burdens into line with those imposed upon the former serfs." Hence barriers to industrialization were actually reinforced by state policy on its own land. In the face of this fact Skocpol's nearly exclusive emphasis on the culpability of the landed upper class in the distortion of emancipation would seem to require serious qualification. What this defect signals is Skocpol's failure to adequately consider not only the force of class powers external to the state, but the class nature of the state apparatuses themselves. Both these oversights drastically limit the usefulness of Skocpol's discussion of the pre-conditions of expanded state autonomy.

The urgency and sweep of Skocpol's argument with Marxism seems all out of proportion with the actual content of the potential autonomy thesis, which Skocpol presents as her principal bone of contention with Marxists. The Eighteenth Brumaire, among other texts, may be taken as a justification for the claim that under certain conditions, usually in situations of equilibrium in the class struggle, the state may achieve an exceptional degree of autonomy from the social forces at work in a given society. Given such a tradition Skocpol's potential autonomy thesis could be read as a sort of over-stated and flamboyant version of the Bonapartist argument. Some such reading as this seems to be at the root of Miliband's very mild critique of Skocpol. But what such a reading of Skocpol fails to grasp is that "potential autonomy" is only a special case in a wider brief for the reduction of the salience of class in theories of social revolution. The wider argument is already visible in Skocpol's opening discussion of Marxism. It governs the structure of the rest of her book, to which we now turn.

**Élites, Classes and Revolution** The first phase of Skocpol's argument focuses on the "revolutionary political crisis" wherein the administrative integrity of the state is dissolved by intra-
state conflict. Skocpol wishes to confine the state crisis largely to state terrain, leaving out of account class struggle within the dominant classes — say, between a landed nobility and a bourgeoisie, and between dominant and dominated classes generally. The dominated classes must be excluded from the account since they intervene only after the removal of coercive controls (i.e., after the state has reached an advance degree of decomposition). Intra-dominant class struggle is excluded by Skocpol’s concern to avoid a “society-centered” explanation of revolution generally.

The difficulty with this argument is most apparent in the French case. She simply cannot account for a level of intra-state conflict sufficient to destroy the state’s organizational coherence. On the one hand she argues that the dominant class was “basically unified” economically. Its wealth was “proprietary in nature,” based on a “melange of rents and dues enforced in part by land-lord dominated judicial institutions and through the redistribution of revenues collected under the aegis of the monarchical state.” Moreover the dominant class had reached a considerable level of political unity. It was “virtually united in wanting a less absolutist, more representative national government.” On the other hand this self-same dominant class generated “multi-faceted” political quarrels which “dismantled the old regime administrative system.” How? How did a “basically united,” “socially consolidated,” dominant class “virtually united” on the broad outlines of needed political reforms rip its own state apart?

Skocpol’s answer seems to be that the calling of the Estates General “unleashed countless conflicts of interest and principle.” It did so by posing the question as to “what principles should determine exactly who was represented and with what institutionalized power.” But surely Skocpol’s whole analysis to this point has aimed to demonstrate how little conflict there was to be unleashed among the dominant classes. How can she now appeal to this very conflict to explain the disaggregation of the state? Nor can she reasonably argue that the coherence of the dominant classes depended upon the coherence of the state so that the disorganization of the latter caused the disorganization of the former. This would be a retreat into tautology, since it is precisely the disorganization of the state that must be explained.
The difficulties in Skocpol's treatment of her second revolutionary moment, that of social revolution, are most apparent in her discussion of the Russian February Revolution. Skocpol distinguishes the failed 1905 rising from the February Revolution by distinguishing the Russo-Japanese War from World War I. The rising in 1905 was able to develop as it did because "European Russian was largely denuded of troops" as a result of the war.\(^7\) The dynasty was able to conclude the war and bring the troops to bear on the centers of the rising. Unlike the earlier war, World War I was not "limited and peripheral." Once it began, Russia "could neither remain aloof nor withdraw at will... ."\(^7\) The Czarist repressive apparatus was thus decisively pinned down by opposing states. What troops there were in Petrograd were "recent recruits apprehensive about going to the front and directly familiar with the circumstances of the civilian workers suffering from sky-rocketing prices and shortages of basic necessities."\(^7\)

Skocpol's account of February is defective in a revealing way. While she quite sensibly stresses the damage inflicted on the forces of Czarist repression during course of World War I, she nonetheless greatly underestimates the obstacles facing the masses in February.

According to Allen Wildman, upon whose earlier work Skocpol partially relies, there were 332,000 troops in Petrograd and its suburbs in February 1917. Many of these were indeed demoralized, scantily officered and poorly armed. However, says Wildman: "If even a small fraction of the total available force could be depended upon to carry out the task of armed repression resolutely, the government would have no need to worry; but significant defections or even passivity within such units would spell disaster."\(^7\) Moreover, there were units that were considered especially hardened to repressive chores. Wildman says: "... certain formations — the training companies for NCOs (usually one company out of four in each reserve 'regiment'), the units from the officer training schools, and the armored car and cycle units — were thought to be reliable and were better trained and disciplined."\(^7\) Finally, Petrograd, in spite of the magnitude of the war, was not beyond the reach of a military apparatus hopelessly pinned down at various fronts, as Skocpol suggests when she compares 1905 with 1917. Wildman again: "It should not have been..."
difficult to detach and entrain additional units (calvary units were the most feasible) from the Northern Front within a matter of hours.\textsuperscript{78} As it happens, some units were moved from the Northern Front to the capital in February. In short while Skocpol stresses that Petrograd was largely beyond the reach of repressive response, the historian of the imperial army stresses the very real danger of such a response, describing the question of the loyalty of the "unlimited military force" at the disposal of Czarism as the "crucial factor in the February Revolution."\textsuperscript{79}

Now why do Skocpol and Wildman diverge as they do? The answers are to be sought in Skocpol's problematic. Wildman's position has certain consequences. The more one emphasizes the geographical availability of repression, the more one must emphasize its social unavailability. But the latter emphasis has two unhappy consequences for Skocpol's overall position. If the key to February is found in the geographic unavailability of the troops, then one may rest content with a "state-centered" account, in the sense that other states immobilized the Russian troops. If however one stresses their social unavailability, then the boundaries of a "state-centered" analysis must be broken. The analyst must turn to a largely "society-centered" treatment of the social immobilization of the troops. And Wildman does just this, devoting his first two chapters to the "prior social realities" that shaped the behavior of the Russian army during February.\textsuperscript{80} The second unhappy consequence for Skocpol's analysis is that a "society-centered" discussion of February tends to disorder her conceptual segregation of state crisis and peasant upheaval. As Trotsky remarks: "The war had assembled the peasants into an army, and the revolution had given the army a political character!"\textsuperscript{81} At this point the futility of attempting to wall off the social revolution from the moment of state crisis becomes apparent.

Finally, the rivalry between the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the Chinese revolution is a useful point of departure for an assessment of Skocpol's third moment of revolution — state-building. As noted earlier, Skocpol is highly skeptical of legitimacy and ideology as explanatory concepts. These too often lead to naively voluntarist treatments of revolution. As she says in her introduction to the chapters on state-building: ". . . we shall not seek to deci-
pher or explain the revolutionary developments from the perspective of ideological world views or programs." A discussion of the outcomes of struggles between revolutionary groups contending for state power must focus on differing group access to the resources essential to victory. The key to the KMT-CCP rivalry is sought in the differing resources available to the KMT as an "urban-based" movement and the CCP, "based after 1927 primarily upon peasant support and rural resources." The final victory of the CCP depended not only on its success at peasant mobilization in the countryside, but "also...upon the failure of the Kuomintang to consolidate state power on an urban basis." Why did the KMT fail in the cities? As Skocpol says: "The answer is that the resources just were not there." That is, there were few resources for political mobilization: industrial output was low; industrial workers few; the rail network slight. The CCP on the other hand was, as a rural based movement, at length able to find the "rural resources" necessary "to make possible victories against Japan, the warlords and the Nationalists..." Resource mobilization theory provides here an environmentalist analysis of political action and organization. There appears to be a sort of logic-of-resource-availability which decisively stamps the tasks, organizational methods, etc., of political organizations within given regions. The revolutionary contenders in China were ultimately qualified or disqualified for state-building by the resources available in their base areas. The fate of the KMT was ultimately determined by its resource-poor urban base. The CCP, driven from the cities in 1925-27, was forced at critical moments to turn to peasant mobilization and land reform to survive and triumph over the Japanese invader and the Nationalist movement. The great difficulty with this treatment is that only one contender grasped the logic-of-resource-availability even though both had ample opportunities to do so. In the Bandit Suppression campaigns of the early 1930s, the KMT extended its sphere of action far beyond its urban coastal base. Still, as Skocpol notes, "the Nanking regime demonstrated very little capacity or inclination to reorganize village-level politics and enforce socio-economic reforms. Below the hsien (county) base of the bureaucracy, the gentry still held sway." Finally, in 1937-39 the Nationalists found their urban crutch kicked away
by Japanese aggression. This still more dramatic opportunity to grasp the logic of peasant mobilization was again wasted on the KMT. Why?

Any attempt to qualify or disqualify a revolutionary contender by reference to the resource endowments of its "base" runs aground on the mobility of the contenders. Both were forced into the countryside but only one had ears to hear the lessons of peasant mobilization.

At one point Skocpol, seemingly aware of the limits of the resource argument, turns to a consideration of the ideological commitments of the KMT. The KMT's foremost commitment was to "military conquest." Continued Comintern help and mass mobilization threatened to drive away "upper class Chinese nationalists" and attract foreign hostility and intervention. But the logic of military conquest is just as indeterminate as the logic-of-resource-availability. All contenders for state power were by definition faced with the task of military unification. If the strategic choices of the KMT were fatally inscribed in this project, then the Chinese Communists would have displayed the same craven solicitude for the Chinese upper class and the international adversaries of the Comintern. The class roots of the strategic immobility of the KMT are clearly visible within Skocpol's discussion of the KMT's obsession with military unification. But too attentive a focus on the logic of class struggle is ruled out by Skocpol's general orientation.

I hope that by now it is clear that States and Social Revolutions aims at a thoroughgoing reduction of the salience of class in the course of revolutions. Skocpol's distance from historical materialism can't be gauged alone by an assessment of the "potential autonomy" thesis, important as that is. It is not simply that under certain conditions the state is allowed to break free from class determination, but that the effectivity of class struggle is carefully confined and contained in her account of the revolutionary process as a whole. In the moments of state destruction and construction, it is the actions of élites ensconced in the state and state-oriented élites, respectively, that are decisive. The French and Chinese élites employ their positions of leverage inside the state to bring on state crisis, collapse and popular upsurge.

The moment of mass upsurge and popular participation in the revolution is confined within the decisive moments of élite
action. It is walled off from the moment of state destruction by Skocpol's insistence that the masses can intervene only after "coercive controls" have been removed. In the French and Russian cases, the peasantries exhaust themselves in a spasm of mass upsurge too speedy and autonomous to provide much leverage to the state builders. Hence state construction is also walled off from direct mass intervention, though of course the latter sets constraints in the countryside which the élites must respect.

The Chinese case presents something of an exception in the matter of state construction, but it is an exception that confirms the rule. The greater egalitarianism and local-level democracy of post-revolutionary China is put down to the fact that the Chinese peasantry "couldn't make its own revolution." Peculiarities of the rural Chinese social structure compelled the peasant masses to carry out their social revolution under the tutelage of the available state-oriented élite. This yielded a milder post-revolutionary outcome. Thus Skocpol only varies her schema to demonstrate what great benefits the masses were able to derive from submitting to the discipline of the state-minded élites.

For Marx the class struggle is a political struggle; for Skocpol it is a social struggle, a social interlude in élite political struggle. For Trotsky, revolutions break with a political routine in which "the state, be it monarchical or democratic, elevates itself above the nation and history is made by specialists in that line of business." For Skocpol, the "specialists in that line of business" are never swept from the stage. Nothing could be more dubious for Skocpol than Trotsky's claim that "the most indubitable feature of revolution is the direct interference of the masses in historic events." The problem is not, of course, that Skocpol has had the temerity to challenge Marx and Trotsky, but that her reduction of the salience of class in the revolutionary process generates a series of difficulties in her historical argument. In the French case she avoids a class-based account of the conflict in the Estates General, but finds no satisfactory explanation of the intensity of conflict within that body. In the Chinese case, Skocpol avoids centering her analysis on the class-component of the KMT-CCP rivalry, but proves unable to explain the strategic choices of the KMT. In the Russian case her state-
centered view of the February upheaval obscures a decisive fact: the massive Czarist military presence in Petrograd and its environs. Such are the costs of a state-centered sociology.

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This relegation of class naturally undercuts the few concluding paragraphs Skocpol devotes to the cause of socialism. Skocpol defends a "working class based socialism" to be introduced gradually, accompanied by "mass based political movements struggling to democratize every major institution from the economy to the political parties, army and civil bureaucracy." A prime condition of the success of a social revolution along these lines is "steady progress toward disarmament and international peace." Several of the early reviewers impatiently dismissed these words, and rightly so. As William H. McNeill said, the "logic of her argument makes Marx's aspiration for a 'working class based socialism' entirely implausible." How can a mass-based democratization of the state's coercive controls be mounted? Her own discussion envisions mass intervention only after the removal of coercive controls. Why will state rulers submit to the desired democratic transformations? Surely such changes embody a breakdown of that collective order so essential to the interests of the state. Finally, how can a social revolution run its course in a tranquil international environment? Has she not herself stressed the role of disturbances in the international state system in "virtually all outbreaks of revolutionary crisis?" Is this outlook not rather too voluntaristic, indifferent to the autonomous interests of the state, and neglectful of the realities of international relations? Skocpol's theoretical outlook reduces her political views to a mere cri du coeur.

Notes

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1. See, for example, John Dunn's review of Theda Skocpol's States and Social Revolutions, in Political Quarterly (January-March 1980), pp. 111-3; or Walter

2. Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol, eds., Bringing the State Back In (Cambridge, 1985); Theda Skocpol, ed., Vision and Method in Historical Sociology (Cambridge, 1984).

3. Theda Skocpol, States and Social Revolutions (Cambridge, 1979), p. 292.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., p. 29.

6. Ibid., pp. 27-8.


8. Skocpol, Revolutions, p. 14. (See n. 3 above.)

9. Ibid., p. 15.

10. Ibid., p. 17.

11. Ibid., p. 18.

12. Ibid., p. 19.

13. Ibid., p. 23.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid., p. 29.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid., pp. 47-51.

19. Ibid., p. 49.


21. Ibid., pp. 112-7.

22. Ibid., pp. 164-71.

23. Ibid., p. 31.

24. Ibid., p. 164.

25. Ibid., p. 168.


27. Ibid., pp. 164-8.

28. Ibid., p. 167.

29. Ibid., p. 16.


32. Skocpol, Revolutions, p. 18.


39. Claudin, Marx, Engels et la Révolution de 1848, p. 49. (See n. 30 above.)

40. Ibid., p. 443.

41. See, for example, Lenin, “The Collapse of the Second International” (see n. 36 above). The cornerstone of the outlook is, of course, Lenin’s “Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism,” in idem, Collected Works, vol. 22, pp. 185-304.
42. V.I. Lenin, "Letters from Afar," vol. 23, p. 298. (See n. 33 above.)
46. Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*, p. 98. (See n. 45 above.)
47. Skocpol, *Revolutions*, p. 98.
52. Skocpol, *Revolutions*, pp. 30-2.
54. See the summary at *ibid.*, pp. 109-10; for Japan, see *ibid.*, pp. 102-3; for Prussia, see *ibid.*, pp. 105-9.
67. Skocpol, *Revolutions*, p. 56.
81. Trotsky, p. 188.
82. Skocpol, *Revolutions*, p. 172.
86. Ibid., p. 247.
87. Ibid., pp. 247-8.
88. Ibid., p. 262.
89. Ibid., pp. 252, 262.
90. Ibid., p. 249.
91. Ibid., p. 246.
92. Ibid.
93. Ibid., pp. 277-8.
94. Ibid., p. 279.
95. Ibid., pp. 277-8.
96. Trotsky, p. 17.
97. Ibid.
98. Skocpol, Revolutions, p. 293.
99. Ibid.
100. William H. McNeill, review of Theda Skocpol’s States and Social Revolutions, in American Historical Review (February 1980), p. 86.